

The Beautiful Wife

Focused on Christ, Fulfilled in Marriage

By Sandy Ralya

Kregel Publications

www.kregel.com

About Beautiful Womanhood

Beautiful Womanhood is a Christian marriage mentoring ministry for wives. Since 2003, women have been coming together through Beautiful Womanhood small groups, where they gain insight from Sandy Ralya's teaching, personal guidance from a marriage mentor, and support from a loving community of women in order to grow as a wife.

Beautiful Womanhood Small Groups

In each Beautiful Womanhood small group, a marriage mentor meets with up to six married women in her home or at church. Together they use the curriculum contained in this book to guide discussion. Each woman leaves each small group session with practical action steps to apply in her marriage and talking points to use with her husband. When the group meets again, they share hope from what God is doing, offer encouragement for the journey, and provide accountability to continue growing as a wife.

"God has used the Beautiful Womanhood program to give new life to my marriage. Our marriage has rejuvenated intimacy"

—Angie, small group participant

Beautiful Womanhood Mentor Edition

Beautiful Womanhood Mentor Edition is an expanded version of the book designed for marriage mentors which also includes:

- Guidance on becoming a confident marriage mentor.
- Hostess guide to simplify hospitality for God's glory.
- Instructions on how to implement Beautiful Womanhood small groups in your church or neighborhood.

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The Beautiful Wife will be published by Kregel Publications in Spring 2012.

Beautiful Womanhood Mentor Edition is available for purchase at www.beautifulwomanhood.com.

“I watched my women grow and change as their lives and marriages were touched. Beautiful Womanhood is a ‘God idea’!”

—Karen, marriage mentor

Beautiful Womanhood Marriage Seminars

To generate excitement about the Beautiful Womanhood small group mentoring program, churches or community groups may host a Beautiful Womanhood seminar led by author and speaker, Sandy Ralya.

“The Beautiful Womanhood Seminar was not only an extremely effective way to launch the Beautiful Womanhood program, but it was also powerful, informative and fun. The number of Beautiful Womanhood small groups that began far exceeded my expectations.”

—Anne, women’s ministry leader

Learn More

Visit www.beautifulwomanhood.com to learn more about the Beautiful Womanhood marriage ministry.

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Introduction

Don't let the title confuse you. This isn't a book for women desiring physical beauty. *Beautiful Womanhood* is a book for the gloriously messy woman who has serious and not-so-serious questions about her role as a wife. It's a book for the woman who longs to develop deep relationships with real women who don't gloss over the difficult realities of life. It's a book for the woman who wants to know what God says about her role within marriage.

The wife's role is a difficult thing to figure out in this day and age. As a matter of fact, it's always been a hard role to understand. After all, it's not a one-size-fits-all kind of job, and it may require tweaking with each new season of life. Your marriage is different than mine, and both of our marriages are different than your friend's. Recipe theology leaves women hungry. But there are answers that satisfy. As you work through the twelve chapters in *Beautiful Womanhood*, I believe you'll find some of those answers. In fact, as you work through this book, the more you turn to God and talk vulnerably within a loving community of women, the more answers you'll find. I believe the stories of imperfect women with imperfect marriages will refresh you and also challenge you to make changes in your role as a wife, which will improve your marriage. That is my prayer for you—that through personal change, your marriage will change too! It is my passion to help women discover God's heart for their marriage, just as other women help me. I've mentored women one-on-one, taught marriage-focused Bible studies, led women's marriage seminars, and I founded the marriage mentoring ministry called *Beautiful Womanhood*, which I currently direct. This book grew from those experiences. Join me as I share biblical principles and their practical application, illustrating them with real-life experiences. When women share with each other the details of their journeys with God as wives, it's a beautiful thing indeed.

Special Note: This book is for marriage enrichment. If you have serious marriage issues, you should seek professional help, knowing that God loves you and desires your safety and healing. If you are in an abusive relationship, it is not your fault! Please seek help immediately by contacting a pastor, trained Christian counselor, or the domestic abuse hotline at 1-800-799-SAFE (7233).

1

Equipping for the Journey

*Make me walk along the path of your commands,
for that is where my happiness is found.—Psalms 119:35*

*Two roads diverged in a wood, and I—
I took the one less traveled by,
And that has made all the difference.—Robert Frost*

When I met Tom, he swept me off my feet, and I eagerly agreed to be his wife. Throughout our short engagement, I observed things in him that concerned me, but I overlooked them—I was getting married! We could work on the rough edges later. On a cold December day, Tom and I passionately vowed our lives to one another forever.

It wasn't winter's icy winds that cooled my passion to love, honor, and cherish. It was my inability to deal with Tom's rough edges grating on my own. Marriage is all about becoming one, and I had no idea how to make that happen. I needed help.

Who can you turn to when you're struggling with marriage issues? Where do you find the practical advice you need to make a good marriage great? What is God's truth concerning your role as wife?

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I had heard good teaching at church, but I didn't understand how to make the information practical and relevant to my situation. I was afraid to talk about my marriage and expose its rotten spots; everyone else's marriage seemed so good. Ill-equipped and isolated, I responded to my marriage problems with what came naturally to me: preaching at Tom. When preaching didn't work, I got angry or withdrew my love to signal my hurt or disappointment. That didn't work either, and it made us both miserable. After eleven years of suffering, I decided there had to be a better way of dealing with the problems I faced than simply protecting myself from getting hurt or retaliating in anger. I turned toward God and began studying His Word. I also revealed my secret pain to others. God used His Word and women—friends, family members, and a Christian counselor—to mentor me, which enlarged my understanding of my role as a wife. As I learned and grew, I made choices to reverse negative cycles which had plagued me for years. When I gave God the control over my marriage relationship, He accomplished in five months what I couldn't in eleven years. He turned our marriage around and began the process of healing it. My experience parallels a biblical plan for strengthening marriage. In Paul's letter to Titus, he stresses the importance of three things for married women: dependence on God, understanding the wife's role, and vulnerability within a community of women.

But as for you, promote the kind of living that reflects right teaching.... [T]each the older women to live in a way that is appropriate for someone serving the Lord. They must not go around speaking evil of others and must not be heavy drinkers. Instead, they should teach others what is good. These older women must train the younger women to love their husbands and their children, to live wisely and be pure, to take care of their homes, to do good, and to be submissive to their husbands.¹

Following this plan, healing will break forth in your life, just as it did in mine. It doesn't matter whether your marriage is an oasis, a desert, or something in between. God uses a community of women and these principles to strengthen, encourage, and heal *you*.

¹ Titus 2:1, 3-5.

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Turn to God

Because every marriage is unique, what works in one marriage may not be effective in another. Generic answers aren't going to work—you need specific answers, tailored to your situation. Where can you find marriage help this specialized?

Ruth Graham, wife of evangelist Billy Graham, found the help she needed by turning to God and making “Christ her home, her purpose, her center, her confidant, and her vision,” her daughter, Ruth, said. Because she turned to God, “Her happiness and fulfillment did not depend on her circumstances.”²

Your happiness and fulfillment as a wife is founded on whether or not you turn to God in all the circumstances you face. When you fail to obtain help from God, you're left with only your own efforts to grow your relationship. It won't be enough.

As a Christian, I struggled for many years trying to “be” a good wife. By doing the right things and saying the right words, I believed I could achieve a great marriage. My attempts were frustrated, however, by ignorance and sin. Exhaustion and despair forced me to accept the fact that I was unable to fashion the marriage I desired on my own.

Patiently, God waits for you and me to turn to Him and lean into His ability to save and heal. He will not force Himself into any area of our lives in which He hasn't been invited. God waits for you to tire of attempting the impossible on your own. He waits for you to ask for His help. During a time when my husband and I needed God's help, we were discussing with friends the importance of turning to God and trusting in His ability to help with the big and small details of our lives. “After all,” I blurted, “God generally does a good job!” After a brief moment of silence the others burst out in laughter. “He *generally* does a good job?” they exclaimed.

² Ruth Bell Graham in Ruth Bell Graham's Obituary published by the Billy Graham Evangelistic Association, ©2007 Ruth Bell Graham. Reprinted by permission. All rights reserved.

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Have you ever felt like this? Have you felt that God has let you down in some way? Have you been running your life and marriage under the power of your limited strength and wisdom, thinking you will do a better job without His help? How is that working for you?

When you choose to do marriage on your own, to journey independently, it's as if you carry heavy chains around your neck, chains of wrong thoughts or imperfect knowledge you've acquired along the way. These chains are too heavy for you. No matter how hard you try, your attempts are frustrated and often filled with pain. The shame of failure makes it difficult to move forward.

Adam and Eve experienced this, too. They took matters into their own hands—trying out independence—and failed. Immediately, they suffered shame and blame. The first marriage experienced the same painful symptoms of independence that we experience when we do marriage on our own.

Isn't it ironic that, from a worldly perspective, independence is synonymous with freedom? Yet, in a spiritual sense, independence leads to bondage and pain. You were not created to live independently from God. He never intended you to go it alone.

As Christian wives, we discover there's a better way. "There can be no personal freedom where there is not an initial personal surrender."³ When we depend on God, relinquish control, and seek His leadership, we experience freedom—freedom from guilt, pain, and shame. In fact, God accomplishes more through us than we could ask, think, hope, or imagine. When facing difficult situations in your marriage, picture Jesus removing the chains of independence from your neck and saying, "I will free you from the work of figuring things out on your own. Now, you're free to respond to the situation knowing I love you and am with you. Allow Me to work through you to accomplish beautiful things."

³ *Strange Freedom: The Best of Howard Thurman on Religious Experience and Public Life* by Earl Fluker. ©1998 Walter Earl Fluker and Catherine Tumber. Reprinted by permission of Beacon Press, Boston.

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Turn toward the One who loves you. Allow His love to flow through you so that you are able to love your husband despite your different personalities, communication styles, interests, strengths, and weaknesses.

How do you turn to God and receive His wisdom and power for your marriage? Through the Bible, prayer, and praise.

Read the Word

Many people think of the Bible as little more than a history book with lots of do's and don'ts thrown in to keep them in line. During the early years of my marriage, I much preferred romance novels to the Bible. I read the Bible because I felt it was my Christian duty, but I didn't always alter my actions to fit its message. When I lost hope in my ability to repair my marriage, I turned to God. I surrendered my will and determined to follow His ways.

It was then that I read 1 Peter 3:1-3, "In the same way, you wives must accept the authority of your husbands, even those who refuse to accept the Good News. Your godly lives will speak to them better than any words. They will be won over by watching your pure, godly behavior." How can a wife get her message across without words? By living a godly life.

God empowered me to follow the instructions in this verse. I stopped nagging and preaching at Tom. Newfound strength and dignity invaded my heart as a result of my obedience. Tom noticed the changes in my demeanor and behavior and responded positively. This, in turn, encouraged me to continue on this path.

The Bible is a great source of information for wives. I recommend beginning your study of the Bible by reading five minutes a day. Meditate on a verse or two. When a few verses really touch me, I'll re-read them for an entire week before moving on.

Here are a few to get you started:

- Psalms 34:3,4
- Proverbs 3:5,6
- Matthew 7:1,2

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- John 14:15
- 2 Timothy 2:21

Meditating on God's Word will transform your thinking. Transformed thinking produces new actions. Gradually, you'll begin to experience the power and good results that come from obeying God's Word.

If you're a new Christian, start reading the book of John to discover more about who God is and what He promises to those who believe in Him. Proverbs provides sound bites of wisdom for everyday matters that wives face. You can find a detailed description of God-honoring love in 1 Corinthians 13.

Reading the Bible gives you wisdom for your marriage.

Pray

Prayer is talking to God. Little conversations with God will reveal much needed wisdom for wives. He is your personal Counselor, waiting for you to come into His office through the door of prayer.

"That's why I [Jesus] urge you to pray for absolutely everything, ranging from small to large. Include everything as you embrace this God-life, and you'll get God's everything."⁴ Bring to God everything that concerns your marriage, and He will teach you how to live.

Last year, Tom and I had an argument that left me hurt and confused. Through prayer, I asked God to reveal to us any hidden sin in either of our hearts that may have caused the disagreement. Soon after I prayed, Tom apologized and took full responsibility for the argument.

God wants you to pray about absolutely everything because He cares! If my heart becomes heavy about anything, I roll my burdens onto God's outstretched arms. I experience relief when I give Him my concerns in prayer.

Prayer includes giving and taking. Through prayer, you give your concerns to God, but you don't leave empty-handed! God wants to give you the

⁴ Mark 11:24, *The Message*.

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answers you seek. Because communication with God is a two-way street, it's important not only to talk to God but to listen for His guidance. Spend quiet moments listening for His voice. Though few ever hear an audible voice, many sense it deep in their spirit.

For the first eleven years of my marriage, I brought a lot of concerns to God but rarely allowed Him to teach me. Had I listened, I would have heard His thoughts about me and my role as a wife. He wanted to do good works through me. Because I wasn't as teachable as I thought, I forfeited the wisdom I needed so badly.

Since then, I've learned to listen with a notebook and pen in hand. During prayer, I form a question based upon my concern and wait. Often, a verse of Scripture, a thought, a picture, or an impression penetrates my conscious mind. Whatever it is, I write it down. Sometimes it makes sense to me, and sometimes my understanding doesn't come until later. If He instructs me to do something, I try to obey right away.

If you're unaccustomed to sitting quietly, it may take some time before your mind settles down to listen. It will take practice. Give your concerns to God and wait.

At other times, the answers I'm seeking don't come how or when I expect them. If you've experienced this, it doesn't mean that God isn't working through your prayers or that your faith is weak. Often, God answers in ways you don't expect. His timing is rarely yours. That's because His plans for you are much broader than you can imagine (Jeremiah 29:11) and He is working everything together for good (Romans 8:28). In times like these, you have an opportunity to deepen your faith by trusting Him. Trust God in prayer, and you will get God's everything!

As you journey through marriage, I recommend you keep a prayer journal. Enter specific prayer requests and when they are answered, record the answer along with the date. Your trust and faith that God hears and answers prayer will grow as you look upon answered prayers with remembrance.

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Praise

Did you know you were created to worship and praise God? As a Christian, it's your highest priority. God isn't seeking the worship, but rather the worshipper. He wants you to draw near to Him and enjoy your relationship with Him so much that you overflow with praise.

If you're anything like me, praise seems an unnatural response to God when you're disappointed. It is easier to complain than to praise when things aren't going your way. However, I've discovered that when things look bleak, praising God is the one thing that lifts my spirits. Why? The Bible tells us that God inhabits the praise of His people. Your praise forms a throne from which He reigns. He rules with power in this place. You will actually sense His presence when you choose to praise Him. There's nothing like the presence of God to overcome a dark mood. A woman who discovers the power that accompanies praise will be strengthened to love her husband when loving him is difficult.

If you're not used to praising God on your own, start telling God how thankful you are for His salvation—for all He did for you on the cross. Thank Him specifically for daily blessings you enjoy. Thank Him for your husband. Thanking and praising lifts your spirit, blesses God, and allows God's peace to fill your heart.

Philippians 4:6-7 says, "Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, *with thanksgiving*, present your requests to God. And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus."⁵ When you're consumed with worry over a problem, thanksgiving and praise draw your focus away from your obstacles and toward Christ who is able to do above and beyond anything you could imagine. "Even contemplating what little we do comprehend of God dissolves doubts, reinforces faith, and restores joy."⁶ Worry never changes anything. Prayer with thanksgiving does.

⁵ NIV, emphasis mine.

⁶ *Letters from Ruth's Attic* by Ruth Graham Bell. ©2007 Billy Graham Evangelistic Association. Reprinted by permission. All rights reserved.

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Turn to God by reading the Bible, praying to Him, and praising Him. Doing so provides a solid foundation for you, as a wife, to stand upon.

Understand Your Role

When you said, “I do,” you committed to fulfill an important, influential role which holds great purpose and destiny. But, “I do...what?” Just what role did God create you to fulfill?

Equal Partner

You are an equal partner with your husband in marriage. You were both created in the image of God and are joint heirs of every good thing He offers. “God created man in His own image, in the image of God He created him; male and female He created them.”⁷

How God made Eve from Adam clues us in to how He intended a marriage relationship to work. Woman wasn’t created from the man’s head to rule over the man, nor was she created from his foot to be his doormat. Woman was created from man’s rib to stand beside him as an equal, co-ruling with him on the earth. “You stand as an equal with man at the apex of God’s created order.”⁸

Though we are equal, we are not the same. Clearly, Adam needed something he didn’t already possess or there would have been no need for Eve. It is these differences that are the source of many challenges.

Somewhere in my husband’s upbringing, Tom came to believe that when a husband and wife disagreed over an issue, it was the woman’s role to back down. A woman could voice concerns if she voiced them ever so carefully, so as not to challenge his thinking. If I were to decide on a course of action he disagreed with, Tom would be displeased. He’d label me “unsubmissive.” A wrong teaching on submission has confused many a man and woman’s thoughts.

⁷ Genesis 1:27, NIV.

⁸ Robert Lewis, *The New Eve* (Nashville: B&H Publishing Group, 2008) 43.

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“If two people agreed on everything, one of them is unnecessary,” said Ruth Graham. Billy responded by saying, “The sooner we accept that as a fact of life, the better we will be able to adjust to each other and enjoy togetherness.”⁹

An equal partnership produces the environment in which submission can flourish. This kind of relationship is in evidence among the Godhead. Jesus Christ is equal to God, yet He relinquished his will and submitted to the Father’s will when He died on the cross. You must see yourself as an equal before you can choose to submit from a heart of love. Equality confers dignity upon submission.

In Ephesians 5, the infamous chapter on submission, Paul writes that husbands and wives are to submit to one another. Neither can force submission—it is a decision each must make. The husband is to love the wife as Christ loves the church and laid His life down for her. The wife is to submit to her husband as she does to Christ.

God calls the husband to lay down his life for his wife—to put her needs above his own. But what do you do if your husband doesn’t love you in this way?

Don’t wait for your husband to obey God before doing so yourself. For the sake of your marriage, you can start the ball rolling. As you learn new biblical principles about your role as a wife in the following chapters, embrace them (submit to God) and God will transform you. Your husband will be impacted by your new behavior.

As an equal partner with your husband, your role holds great influence.

Friend

Your husband needs a friend in his wife. Genesis 2:18 in *The Message* says, “God said, ‘It’s not good for the man to be alone; I’ll make him...a companion.’” Though Adam was surrounded by animals, Fido couldn’t give

⁹ *It’s My Turn* by Ruth Bell Graham. ©1982 The Ruth Graham Literary Trust. Reprinted by permission. All rights reserved.

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him what he needed most. Adam could only experience true companionship with someone who also bore God's image.

In order to maintain and grow my friendships with other women, I spend time doing things we enjoy, whether it's meeting for coffee, shopping, or walking together. In the same way, "men place surprising importance on having their wives as recreational companions.... [S]pending recreational time with his wife is second only to sex for the typical husband."¹⁰

When I was a busy wife with young children, it was easy to lose sight of the fact that Tom needed my companionship in recreational activities. Today, I see the deep need a man has for his wife to share his interests.

Women whom I admire sow seeds of friendship into their marriage by participating in their husbands' favorite activities. Some women learn to fish, while others read in the boat while their husbands fish. Many learn to golf, hike, bike, or ride in convertibles—despite bad hat hair! Some sit on bleachers watching their husbands compete in baseball or hockey games. I remember one woman saying she simply sat beside her husband while he watched Monday night football—and he gushed gratefulness for her company.

In addition to joining your husband in his favorite activities, you can also strive to find a shared hobby or passion. One couple I know discovered that they both love to go birding, and this hobby has greatly benefited their marriage. Recently Tom and I developed a passion for eating healthy, natural foods. We now enjoy experimenting with new recipes as we cook together, shopping at farmer's markets, and taste-testing unique snacks from our local health-food store. Chopping vegetables side-by-side in the kitchen has deepened our friendship!

Is there a hobby or an interest that both you and your husband enjoy? Make time for it, talk about it, and nurture this shared passion in order to grow as friends.

¹⁰ Willard F Harley, Jr, *His Needs, Her Needs* (Grand Rapids: Revell, 2001) 77.

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Your husband needs a friend who will listen. Most men don't disclose their deep thoughts to other men. You need to be that friend. As a friend to your husband, you have great influence.

Helper

God made wives to be companions who would help their husbands. "Then the Lord God said, 'It is not good for the man to be alone. I will make a helper who is just right for him.'"¹¹

[The help a man] needs most to succeed in life is one that is distinctly feminine. It is a help that receives, admires, nurtures, responds, supports, and loves. A man grows by this kind of help. He matures. He is strengthened to reach higher and do more than he ever could without it. The truth is, every man longs for this kind of help.¹²

Evangelist Billy Graham was a recipient of such help from his wife. "Ruth was my life partner, and we were called by God as a team. No one else could have borne the load that she carried. She was a vital and integral part of our ministry, and my work through the years would have been impossible without her encouragement and support."¹³

A wife helps her husband by giving support and encouragement—as Ruth gave Billy. "Those who support and encourage you bring out your true potential and spark your genius." A wife who encourages her husband and praises his accomplishments will help improve his self-esteem. At times it will be necessary for you to give help by challenging your husband. When my husband was discouraged by his business' lack of success, it would have been destructive for me to support and encourage a direction unsuited to his strengths and talents. Instead, I challenged him to pursue a business model more in line with his abilities and passion. Two heads really are better than one. "If one person falls, the other can reach out and help. But someone who falls alone is in real trouble."¹⁴ If you see

¹¹ Genesis 2:18.

¹² Lewis, 166.

¹³ *It's My Turn* by Ruth Bell Graham.

¹⁴ Ecclesiastes 4:10.

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your husband heading down the wrong path, challenge him with loving encouragement.

Many women have used their position as helper to get their way. Any action born from a selfish motivation is destructive to the marriage relationship. As wives, you do yourself harm by competing for control. A good helper will cooperate rather than compete with her husband, and that cooperation will mutually benefit them.

A wife who helps her husband with the good of the marriage in mind has great influence.

Prayer Warrior

If you want greater influence in the life of your husband, pray for him! Prayer is more effective than nagging, pleading, or arguing, and it fulfills your role to do him good rather than harm (Proverbs 31). Though it's often ignored until we're at our last resort, prayer gets the business of change done. Prayer "is a way to invite God's power into your husband's life for his greatest blessing, which is ultimately yours, too."¹⁵ It's not about getting your way, but getting God's way in the life of your husband. These are the selfless prayers that please God.

Years ago, I began praying for my husband. I'll admit some of my prayers were rather self-seeking. I wanted Tom to do this or buy that for me. You can ask for whatever you like, but if it's not God's will, you're not going to get it.

God answers prayers that agree with His Word. When you're reading the Bible, look for promises you want to see unfold in the life of your husband. This will benefit you much more than a leather sofa or a piece of jewelry. Pray daily for your husband's needs. Pray that his strengths will be used to bring glory to God and that his weaknesses will be strengthened and healed. Ask God to send him godly friends who will encourage his spiritual growth. Pray for his emotional and physical safety. Thank God for leading and guiding him in his role as a husband, father, and co-worker. Ask your

¹⁵ *The Power of a Praying Wife* by Stormie Omartian. ©2007 by Stormie Omartian. Published by Harvest House Publishers, Eugene. Used by Permission. www.harvesthousepublishers.com.

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husband if he has any needs you can pray for and then check back to see how things are going. He will be grateful to know you care about what's going on in his life and are faithfully praying for him.

In your prayer journal, set aside a special section devoted to verses you specifically pray for your husband. Over the years, I've experienced many answers to prayers I prayed for Tom. You will too.

Your role as an equal partner, friend, helper, and prayer warrior fulfills the vows you made when you said, "I do."

Share within a Community of Women

As a newly married woman, I longed to talk to someone about my marriage struggles, but I was afraid others wouldn't relate. I mistakenly believed everyone else's marriage was perfect. My own pain blinded me to the fact that everyone struggles to one degree or another during the life of their marriage.

Over time, I encountered a few women with whom I was able to develop a relationship of trust. Exposing my pain to them was like opening the emotional floodgates of my heart. The pressure which had built for many years was finally released.

Within this community of women, I was able to ask questions about how to apply biblical teaching to my particular situation. My burden was lightened when they prayed for me. Though they didn't always have concrete answers, I was comforted just knowing they cared.

Because of this, I am passionate about bringing women together to experience love, purpose, and hope within a community of women. When women gather together for godly mentoring, wonderful things happen. Recently, I asked a young woman to describe how her mentoring relationship impacted her life. Here is her story:

I went through a difficult time three years ago, and it left me broken, hurt, depressed, and unable to trust God or those around me. Mentoring was the positive force in my life that gently guided me back to Jesus. Time spent with my mentor

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overwhelmed me with love and reminded me of my worth and purpose. She accepted me as I was and didn't judge me. During each mentoring session, I experienced relief from the burdens I came with because I was able to talk them through. I left our sessions with a game plan, and she held me accountable to follow through. My mentor is one of my biggest cheerleaders! Most of all, I see Jesus in her. He speaks guidance, love, and laughter through her. When I leave, it always feels like we had lunch with Jesus.

My mentor has been very real and vulnerable with me so I feel safe to share openly. She doesn't pretend to know all the answers or just make something up. She is a friend who cares. She'll stop and pray for God's guidance when she doesn't know how to respond. Sharing her past and present experiences, I learn that I'm not alone in my struggles. When I'm in need of correction, she gives it in love—usually I don't even realize it happened until I'm on my way home!

My mentor gives hope that God has good things in store for me.

In order for a community of women to experience the best God has to offer, three things must be present: godliness, transparency, and accountability.

Godliness

A community of women will flourish with God at its center. This is not the time for water-cooler-husband-bashing! God instructs us to examine our own lives before we figure out how to fix our husbands. When we embrace the principles found in His Word, we'll grow, and our marriages will deepen.

Transparency

In this age of perfection, do you keep your struggles under wraps to avoid exposing a less-than-perfect marriage and risk rejection? Even after our marriage improved, it was still difficult for me to admit when Tom and I struggled over an issue. It's not easy to admit weakness. But, until you

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admit you have a problem, you cannot be helped. When you expose your struggles to others, you are in a prime position for healing.

If the women who mentored me hadn't been honest about their own struggles, it would have been difficult for me to share openly. Because others were transparent, I was able to make that leap.

If you desire to experience intimacy within a community of women, you must move past the fear of vulnerability. Being real is the key to developing close relationships with women. Your transparency unlocks transparency in others. The degree to which you are vulnerable is the degree of intimacy you will achieve.

Accountability

If you're serious about improving your marriage, you will submit to accountability within a community of women. Jesus reminds us in the Bible that it's not enough to hear good teaching—we must do what we've learned.

Beautiful Womanhood small groups are designed with accountability in mind. Embrace the action steps at the end of each chapter. Use the talking points with your husband. Report back to the group when you next meet. Cheer each other on to nurture positive behavior patterns and choke off the negative ones.

In the loving safety of a Beautiful Womanhood small group, one woman admitted (in tears) she had never uttered words of appreciation for her husband. She explained that she'd grown up in a home where much was expected but little or no appreciation was given in return. On her way home, she called her husband to thank him for a kindness he had performed the preceding day for a member of her extended family. At the following meeting, she was happy to report back to the group that she was focused on appreciating her husband.

Knowing others are holding you accountable will give you the extra nudge you need to make changes that impact your marriage.

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Equipping for the Journey | 17

* * * *

As you journey through the next eleven chapters of *Beautiful Womanhood*, you will encounter topics which are relevant to each and every marriage. Approach each chapter by turning to God, understanding your role, and sharing within a community of women. When you do, you will be equipped to journey through all the hills and valleys of your marriage, and you will be blessed!

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Chapter Review

Main Point

Women are equipped for the journey of marriage when they turn to God, understand their role as wife, and share within a community of women.

Discussion

1. When you find yourself in a difficult marriage situation, what is your first response? Who do you turn to first?
2. Think of a situation when you turned to God for help. What was the result? How did this impact you? Your marriage?
3. Have you experienced a time when God has spoken to you through His Word?
4. Have you experienced a time when God has spoken in answer to your prayer? How did this impact you?
5. Which aspect(s) of your role as wife is most challenging? Why?
6. What's one small step you could take to actively fulfill your role?
7. Is this your first time sharing in a community of women? What are you most afraid of? What are you looking forward to?

Action Steps

Read the Bible every day—even if only one verse. Pray for your husband every day! Praise God for your marriage.

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Prayer

Dear God, thank You for my husband. Help me to see him the way You do. Encourage my husband to love You with all his heart, soul, mind, and strength. Remind me to turn to You first when I don't know what to do. As I read the Bible and pray, help me to understand my role as a wife. Fill me with patience as I wait for Your guidance and answers to my prayers. Please give me the courage to share openly and honestly with the women who surround me so I can be strengthened with love, purpose, and hope. In Jesus' name, Amen.

Talk to Your Husband

Let your husband know you'll be praying for him every day. Ask him if he has a need you can pray about.

Suggested Reading

New Women's Devotional Bible—Published by Zondervan

God's Guidance: Finding His Will for Your Life—Elisabeth Elliot

The Power of a Praying Wife—Stormie Omartian

Sacred Influence: What a Man Needs from His Wife to Be the Husband She Wants—Gary Thomas

Special Note

If you have never accepted Jesus as your personal Lord and Savior, I invite you to make a decision that will change your life as well as your eternal destiny.

The Bible tells us, “For all have sinned; all fall short of God’s glorious standard. Yet now God in His gracious kindness declares us not guilty. He has done this through Christ Jesus, who has freed us by taking away our sins.”¹⁶

God loves you so much that He sent His only Son to die on a cross to pay for your sins. He took your place so you would no longer be separated from Him—that’s how much He desires a relationship with you. But first, you must accept His gift of love by asking Him into your heart. Above all, I desire that you enjoy an intimate relationship with Jesus Christ. No longer will you journey alone. Jesus Christ is there to love, protect, heal, and guide you—no matter the circumstances.

Pray this prayer:

Dear Lord Jesus, I know that I am a sinner and need your forgiveness. I believe you died for my sins and rose from the dead, and one day are coming to take me to live with you forever. Forgive me and wash me white as snow. I invite you to come into my heart and transform me by your love. Help me to trust you as I share this love with those you place in my life. In Jesus’ name I pray, Amen.

If you have asked Jesus into your heart, talk to your mentor about your decision. Ask your Christian friends to support you, and find a church where you can be nurtured in your new faith. I encourage you to visit www.crazylovebook.com or www.BillyGraham.org for more resources. God bless you!

¹⁶ Romans 3:23-24.

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2

Inviting Romance

In quietness and confidence is your strength.—Isaiah 30:15b

*At some core place, maybe deep within, perhaps hidden or buried in her heart, every woman wants to be seen, wanted, and pursued.
We want to be romanced.¹⁷*

Envision your husband wrapping his arms around you from behind and whispering in your ear, “You’re amazing,” or stealing you away for dinner at your favorite restaurant (he made babysitting arrangements), or holding your hand while taking a walk, or ringing your doorbell only to present you with a bouquet of your favorite flowers. What fans the embers of romance deep within your heart? Most women dream of romance but many don’t consider how their words or actions might douse the passion in their marriages. Are your words or actions stumbling blocks or invitations to your husband to join you in a romantic relationship?

Have you ever heard the saying, “If you do what you’ve always done, you’ll get what you’ve always gotten”? This saying rings true in regards to romance. Reflect a moment on the results of your actions and words and ask, “Do I like what I’m getting?”

If you desire more romance, you must change your actions and trace a new path for your feet. Hebrews 12:13 says, “Mark out a straight path for your feet. Then those who follow you, though they are weak and lame, will not stumble and fall but will become strong.”

Let’s look at five steps—using the acronym TRACE—to invite your husband into greater romance. Through these steps, you can TRACE a new path for your feet and provide your husband the safety and encouragement he needs to set foot upon the path of a more romantic marriage.

Trust instead of control

Respect instead of demean

Appreciate instead of criticize

Confer confidence instead of doubt

Expose vulnerability instead of defensiveness

¹⁷ *Captivating: Unveiling the Mystery of a Woman’s Soul* by John and Stasi Eldredge. ©2005 Thomas Nelson Inc., Nashville. Reprinted by permission. All rights reserved.

Trust Instead of Control

Do you struggle with a desire to control those around you? Most women, including myself, wrestle with control issues. The desire to control our husbands is a result of sin. God told Eve in the Garden of Eden, “You will bear children with intense pain and suffering. *And though your desire will be for your husband, he will be your master.*”¹⁸ The Hebrew word, *tesuqah*, translated here as *desire*, means the “desire to overcome or defeat another.”

To get a sense of whether you have control issues in your marriage, ask yourself: Do I correct my husband? Do I instruct my husband? Do I try to improve my husband?”
I have been guilty of all three!

Correcting Your Husband

I am engaged in a never-ending struggle to stop correcting my husband (and others). This tendency shows itself most often in the area of pronunciation. Every time Tom mispronounces a word, I pipe up with the correct pronunciation, and if he stumbles over a word, I’m there to pick him up, dust him off, and set him on his feet again. It’s a knee-jerk reaction.

Tom doesn’t appreciate my corrections. They point out the fact that he isn’t doing something right. Most men don’t appreciate this kind of exposure. Unless your husband asks for your help, spotlighting his mistakes robs you of romance with him—the very thing you desire.

Instructing Your Husband

A young woman once asked me if it was right to instruct her husband in how to bathe their baby. She had asked him for more help with the kids, and one evening he offered to give the baby a bath. Things were going smoothly until she heard crying coming from the bathroom. She flew into the bathroom; shampoo was in the baby’s eyes, and Dad was working frantically to get it out. Mom stepped in to save the day, instructing Dad in how to do the job.

I asked her, “Did he ask for your help?”

“No.”

“Do you think he will offer his baby-bathing skills again anytime soon?”

“No.”

“Was this the result you wanted?”

“No.”

I told her she had probably married a bright man who could figure out how to avoid irritating their baby’s eyes. She could have waited until he had finished and thanked him for helping her. She could have given him a big hug and thanked him for being a great dad. This would have given her what she wanted—help with the kids and an opportunity to prove her trust in him. In turn, this would have made him feel appreciated and loved—fertile soil for the seeds of romance.

Improving Your Husband

One evening while on vacation, my husband and I decided to go to a nice restaurant. I dressed in a black, vintage cashmere jacket, silk scarf, and heels. Tom chose black hiking shoes, khaki zip-off pants, and a white, wrinkled camp shirt, complete with mesh vents for proper ventilation, plenty of Velcro, and loops and snaps for holding everything from compasses to ice-picks. The frosting on the cake came in the form

¹⁸ Genesis 3:16, emphasis mine.

of the yellow silk tie he had just bought. I was taking it all in when he proudly announced, “I’m ready to go!”

I didn’t say a word about Tom’s appearance—you can appreciate what restraint that took—because I know something that I didn’t know years ago: men do not like to be improved by their wives. My husband was pleased with his appearance; it reflected the playfulness he felt. He would never dress this way for a business meeting or other formal event, but, on vacation, his outfit could express his fun-loving nature. Any attempt to improve Tom’s attire would have been met with resistance, not romance.

Relinquish Control—Trust God

When you correct your husband, you’re saying, “You didn’t do it right.” When you instruct your husband, you’re saying, “You don’t know how to do it.” When you improve your husband, you’re saying, “You didn’t do it well enough.”

Dr. Ed Cole writes, “When you tell your husband what to do, you become his mother, and a man won’t make love to his mother!”¹⁹

We justify our actions by telling ourselves that we’re just trying to help, but our motive may have more to do with control than help. Control is often rooted in fear. Some women try to control their husbands out of fear that they won’t get what they want. Others fear their husbands’ actions will reflect badly upon them if they don’t step in to help. At the root of this fear is selfishness, and selfishness does not serve as an invitation to romance. Philippians 2:3 says, “Don’t be selfish; don’t live to make a good impression on others.”

You come from a long line of women who would rather control than trust. If you go back to the very beginning, you see how Eve distrusted God and took control. God had placed Adam and Eve in a beautiful garden. He said they could eat from every tree except the tree of the knowledge of good and evil—or they’d die. The serpent deceived Eve, telling her she wouldn’t die, but her eyes would be opened and she would know good and evil, becoming like God. Afraid that she was missing out, Eve took control; she ate the fruit and gave some to her husband. “Eve was convinced that God was withholding something from her.... When Eve was convinced, the artistry of being a woman took a fateful dive into the barren places of control and loneliness.”²⁰

What is there about the nature of control that blocks romance and intimacy? The best way to answer this question is with another question. Do you want to get close to a controlling person? No, of course not. It’s impossible to experience intimacy when controls are placed on you. Your husband feels the same way. It’s time to trust God and let go of control.

How, exactly? It’s simple, but it’s not easy: expose your fear, repent, and turn to God when you feel an urge to control.

For example, I corrected Tom’s pronunciation because I was afraid people might think I didn’t know the correct pronunciation if I didn’t step in. In order to stop, I had to turn to God and admit my fear and control, understand that it’s not my role to instruct Tom, and rely on the community of women around me for encouragement to stop this self-defeating action.

¹⁹ Edwin Louis Cole, *Absolute Answers to Prodigal Problems*, (Southlake: Watercolor, 2003) 35.

²⁰ Jan Meyers, *The Allure of Hope: God’s Pursuit of a Woman’s Heart*, (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 2001) 31, 42. Used by permission of The Navigators. All rights reserved.

“Give all your worries and cares to God, for he cares about you.”²¹ Telling God my worries is easy; giving them to Him—and leaving them in His hands—takes practice. I often pray, “God, if his behavior is bothering you half as much as it’s bothering me, would you please do something!” Most of the time, God isn’t that bothered, and I’m challenged to keep still. When I let God be in charge of instructing my husband, I’m free to enjoy Tom for who he is.

Controlling, instructing, and improving your husband carry him back to his boyhood, and little boys do not walk the path of romance. Trusting your husband will invite him to romance.

Respect Instead of Demean

In my twenties, whenever I blew out my birthday candles, I wished for the same thing: I wanted to respect my husband more. I had read it in the Bible: “[E]ach man must love his wife as he loves himself, and the wife must respect her husband.”²² Unfortunately, I didn’t enjoy any consistency on this point. While the candle smoke wafted upward, I sat back, crossed my arms, and waited for Tom to do something that I could fully respect.

What was wrong? I thought I needed Tom to inspire me to take the action of respect. Instead, I needed to obey God and take the first step toward respect. It has been said that it is easier to act yourself into a new way of thinking than to think yourself into a new way of acting. We would be wise to adopt Nike’s motto and “Just do it!”

What motivates this disrespect of our husbands? Some of us play tit for tat—“If you don’t give me love, I won’t give you respect.” Others think disrespect will motivate them—“When you give me love, I’ll give you respect.” Some of us grew up watching our mothers disrespect our fathers and are simply well-trained. Others of us hope to increase our own low self-esteem by demeaning our husbands—using disrespect as a weapon in a one-sided battle for what we perceive as the only safe place in the household: the top. Pride also triggers disrespect, when we forget that our way is not the only way to do something—“I know better than he does.”

Unless we stop our disrespectful ways and choose to respect our husbands, our best chance for romance lies only in our dreams.

Consider the Chickens’ Way

We live on a small farm, and the term “pecking order” has taken on new meaning for me since we added chickens to our stock. Shortly after establishing them in their coop, we witnessed harassment, chicken-style. The dominant chickens chose a chicken to chase and peck. Every time she went near the feeder, they chased her all over the coop—keeping her from the food she needed for survival.

It didn’t take long to determine which chicken was at the bottom of the pecking order. It was the one with missing feathers and patches of puffy, bloody skin. When one of our chickens looked like this, it was only a matter of time before we found her dead on the floor of the coop.

Ever hear the term “hen-pecked husband”? A hen-pecked husband is usually at the bottom of the pecking order in the home. When you emasculate your husband to this condition, you reduce him to a state that is no longer respectable. You have become your own worst enemy because you truly want a respectable husband. Once again, you thought you were helping elevate your husband to higher and

²¹ 1 Peter 5:7.

²² Ephesians 5:33.

higher levels of manhood, but, in reality, you were diminishing him. His place is now at the bottom of the pecking order of your home, and he isn't able to get what he needs for survival: respect.

Consider Your Husband's Ways

Your husband won't always tell you he feels emasculated or wounded when you demean him. He may step back and allow you to lead rather than fight for control. He may shrink from becoming the man God intended him to be if he fears your disrespectful, sarcastic attitude. The negative message you transmit undermines what he already questions in his heart—his worth as a man.

Perhaps your husband speaks harshly to you or undermines you when he feels disrespected. It becomes a game of matching strength for strength in order to preserve any semblance of self-respect—no matter how shredded.

What does respect have to do with intimacy? When a man is confident in your opinion of him, he can relax with you. He can drop his walls and let you in. He knows that with you, he is safe. He will be valued and respected. And where there is safety, intimacy can grow.

Appreciate Instead of Criticize

It is often easier to be dissatisfied instead of appreciative. Consider the following story sent to me by a young woman:

Just yesterday we were discussing the repair bill on our van and how we were going to cover it. It seems to be an impossible necessity! The not-so-beautiful little girl in me wanted to get angry, stomp, scream, cry, and blame my husband for not taking care of the little issues that continually seem to crop up. I felt his procrastination had caused this seemingly insurmountable repair bill, and I was convinced I had ample reasons for being dissatisfied over how he was handling it. I have learned, however, he is perfectly capable of beating himself up and doesn't need my help doing so. I knew he would clam up and retreat inside himself if I blamed him. So, I chose to honor my husband in order to avoid days of the cold, silent treatment.

While awaiting his return from work, I listed in my mind all the amazing ways he provides for us, the hours he works so I can stay home with our children, and how he comes home happy and helpful to us after long days. I became so filled with appreciation that there was no longer any room for dissatisfaction.

In the grand scheme of life, what is a little repair bill? Our marriage is strong, but it could suffer damage if I let this bill take priority. It's not worth it! I truly believe that when I react in the proper way toward my husband, God rewards me. I made a choice to go to my husband with an attitude of appreciation, praising him for being a hard worker and provider and reassuring him that everything would be fine. He needed my support and encouragement, not my dissatisfaction. Our relationship did not suffer, our intimacy has not been diminished, and God will supply the need!

Can you relate to this internal dilemma? When stressed, do you focus on appreciation or dissatisfaction? Your choice could make the difference between romance and remorse.

What does your husband do (or not do) that causes you disdain? Is it his paycheck? Is it how he performs tasks for you? Is it what he gives you or how he surprises you?

I know women whose husbands have given them gifts from small trinkets to expensive jewelry, but because it wasn't exactly what they wanted, they returned it. I have done this, too.

If a man feels unappreciated—if he feels your continual dissatisfaction—he may give up trying to please you and look for other opportunities that will satisfy his need for appreciation. Are you willing to risk this when the desire of most good men is to satisfy their wives?

As most women have experienced, the male ego is fragile. Your husband may come off with bravado, but inside he's looking for your affirmation and appreciation. Most men can't live without it and will seek validation wherever they can find it. Let your words of appreciation be something your husband can rely on.

Keep a running list of his positive traits and actions. It will help you in those moments when you are annoyed with, irritated by, or wanting to blame your husband; simply running through that list will remind you how much more there is to him than his aggravating tendency to come home late. As Paul instructs us, "Fix your thoughts on what is true, and honorable, and right, and pure, and lovely, and admirable. Think about things that are excellent and worthy of praise."²³

Focusing on the negatives will leave you dissatisfied. Appreciating your man will invite him to romance.

Confer Confidence Instead of Doubt

Do you have confidence in your husband or do you find yourself regularly second-guessing him? Do you struggle with doubt when it comes to his abilities?

At Home

I wanted Tom involved with the discipline of our children but was rarely pleased with his methods. I thought he was too strict and should be more understanding. Instead of communicating clearly with Tom, I undermined his authority by smoothing things over with the kids. My actions conveyed a lack of confidence in my husband. I sabotaged our parenting and our marriage. Our kids learned their parents weren't always on the same team, so if they worked on the more lenient parent, they might get their way. Tom felt hurt and angry. Doubting my husband didn't open any doors to romance.

Men are highly sensitive to signals of doubt because doubt plagues them. "It's not a question—it's *the* question, the one every boy and man is longing to ask. Do I have what it takes? Am I powerful? Until a man knows he's a man he will forever be trying to prove he is one, while at the same time shrink from anything that might reveal he is not."²⁴ If you continually give off signals of doubt, you will confirm the fear that lurks deep within your husband. If a man believes he doesn't have what it takes to please you, there's not much chance he'll attempt romance.

On the Job

The media constantly broadcast fear and doubt concerning the future. Against this tidal wave of doom and gloom it's difficult for a man to confidently believe that God has planned a hopeful future for him.

²³ Philippians 4:8

²⁴ *Wild at Heart* by John Eldredge. ©2001 Thomas Nelson Inc., Nashville. Reprinted by permission. All rights reserved.

At this writing, my husband is going through a job transition. During a recent conversation, it became apparent he was struggling with doubt over his ability to succeed in a new venture. He was really down when he said, “Most men don’t make a job change at fifty.” I asked, “Who says?” He rewarded me with a smile from ear to ear. Tom’s words weren’t so much a statement of fact but a question—he was asking me if I believed he could successfully make a job change at fifty.

A wise wife counteracts the media’s message of fear with a daily dose of confidence. Inspiring confidence in your husband is like pouring water on dry, thirsty ground. What seeds of potential lie dormant within your husband, waiting for the showers of your confidence?

In His Dreams

What does your husband dream of doing? When considering your husband’s dreams, pray about which ones to encourage. If your husband’s dreams take him in a direction which worries you, consider your concerns. Are they rooted in selfishness or fear? If they are motivated by love, it is important that you share them with your husband in a productive manner. Opening a dialogue allows both of you to share doubts concerning the proposed course of action. Together, pray about these doubts, asking God to reveal whether or not He is leading your husband in this direction. You have an important role in your husband’s life, and it includes giving honest feedback concerning his dreams.

It doesn’t always go smoothly when a man, inspired by confidence, explores new horizons, but that isn’t the point. Your focus cannot be on his level of success but on his willingness to try. You don’t always succeed when you try something new, do you? Don’t set your requirements for your husband higher than you would for yourself. Check that your motives are pure. You are inspiring confidence for his benefit, not yours.

Let your husband know that you believe in him. If you don’t, who will? Don’t wait! Breathe words of confidence into your husband today and watch as he stands taller with every word spoken. “A wise woman builds her house, but a foolish woman tears it down with her own hands.”²⁵ Doubting your husband and his abilities tears away at a man; conferring confidence builds him up. A confident man is grateful to the one who believes in him. Conferring confidence invites your husband to romance.

Expose Your Vulnerability Instead of Defensiveness

Special Note: If you are in an emotionally or physically abusive marriage, exposing your vulnerability could be damaging to you instead of healing. I urge you to seek the help you need. Contact the Domestic Abuse Hotline at 1-800-799-SAFE or call your church and ask to be referred to a reputable Christian counselor.

It has become second nature for women to defend themselves.

For untold generations, women have been hurt, taken advantage of, and diminished in their value. With the advent of the Women’s Liberation Movement, women came out swinging against the injustices they’d endured and, in the process, lost something of great value—their vulnerability. There is something so inviting about vulnerability. Vulnerability is armor-less. Vulnerability draws others in. It invites others to look deep inside.

²⁵ Proverbs 14:1.

This invitation to look inside is exactly why so many avoid vulnerability at all cost. It's dangerous. If you offer vulnerability to your husband, what will he do with it? Hurt you? Take advantage of you? Think less of you? These dangers overshadow vulnerability's beauty until you consider a life lived defensively. Living defensively is like living in a fortress—walls built up and weapons ready. The face behind the wall is tense, scanning for threat. A life lived on the defense is a life spent without rest, joy, or freedom. Many women dwell behind walls which inadvertently keep their husbands out, and they wonder why they are not known.

You must take the risk of being vulnerable if you want to invite your husband to romance. True romance involves being known and desired and requires you to tear down the walls of defensiveness.

Sometimes Vulnerability Says, "I'm Hurt."

When you get hurt, do you retaliate in anger or are you vulnerable with your husband and admit your feelings? Retaliating in anger may satisfy your thirst for justice, but it won't give you the results you want. No one approaches a fortress when arrows are flying from it—unless they are prepared for battle.

It takes more courage to admit your feelings than to defend yourself. It requires you to trust God to keep you safe when you expose yourself and to heal you if your husband is not gentle. The good news is that God promises to do all these things and more. Consider Psalm 91, which is a contract between God and those who trust in Him.

Those who live in the shelter of the Most High will find rest in the shadow of the Almighty. This I declare of the Lord: He alone is my refuge, my place of safety; he is my God, and I am trusting him. For he will rescue you from every trap and protect you from the fatal plague. He will shield you with his wings. He will shelter you with his feathers. His faithful promises are your armor and protection. Do not be afraid of the terrors of the night, nor fear the dangers of the day, nor dread the plague that stalks in darkness, nor the disaster that strikes at midday. Though a thousand fall at your side, though ten thousand are dying around you, these evils will not touch you. But you will see it with your eyes; you will see how the wicked are punished.

If you make the Lord your refuge, if you make the Most High your shelter, no evil will conquer you; no plague will come near your dwelling. For he orders his angels to protect you wherever you go. They will hold you with their hands to keep you from striking your foot on a stone. You will trample down lions and poisonous snakes; you will crush fierce lions and serpents under your feet! The Lord says, "I will rescue those who love me. I will protect those who trust in my name. When they call on me, I will answer; I will be with them in trouble. I will rescue them and honor them. I will satisfy them with a long life and give them my salvation."

God wants to be your defender. When you retaliate in anger, you allow your sinful nature to usurp God's role, causing problems. "If your sinful nature controls your mind, there is death. But if the Holy Spirit controls your mind, there is life and peace."²⁶

You must come to recognize what triggers you to defend rather than admit your pain. Perhaps it's a fear that your needs won't be met or that you're not valuable. When the triggers come, remind yourself that God will defend and protect you if you put your trust in Him.

²⁶ Romans 8:6.

It takes courage initially to admit your feelings, but it's worth it. A better life and more peace are your rewards!

Shooting arrows of anger over your walls doesn't provide your husband the safety he needs to know, desire, and pursue you. Allow God to protect you and go before you, leveling your defenses and making way for your husband to romance you.

Sometimes Vulnerability Says, "I'm Not Perfect."

If your worst side was exposed, do you think you would be rejected? Does a façade give you the acceptance you long for?

Imperfection is not an attractive quality in our culture, and it is often taboo to expose imperfections, so many women cover up their flaws with a socially acceptable, yet false exterior. How many hurting people cover up serious problems for the sake of appearance? There are no perfect people in this world, but there are many who dishonestly portray themselves as "all together."

Can anyone truly come close to being a perfect person? If you give the impression that you have it all together, your husband will struggle with his own self-esteem in light of your seeming flawlessness and will steer clear of revealing his true self for fear of coming up short in your estimation. You may even find yourself less tolerant of your husband's weaknesses—yours have been carefully concealed, so why can't he do a better job hiding his?

A false exterior also keeps you from reaching out to God for the help you need. Unless you admit you need Him, you are keeping God at arms' length rather than experiencing intimacy with Him and receiving help from Him.

Psalms 32:3 says, "When I kept silent, my bones wasted away through my groaning all day long." In other words, when we refuse to confess our sins, we're miserable. But, when we confess them and stop trying to hide them, God forgives us and removes our guilt. We have restored intimacy with Him. I have found that I will not be rejected by God when I'm honest about my problems and ask Him for help. Instead, He draws me into closer relationship. The same is true with my husband. A false exterior keeps me from experiencing intimacy with Tom because I'm holding him at arms' length, attempting to conceal my imperfections.

Maintaining a façade to hide your weaknesses prevents your husband from knowing the real you, flaws and all. Exposing your weaknesses gives your husband the opportunity to love you as you are; this is vital for romance.

Sometimes Vulnerability Says, "You may Have a Point."

Are you open to what your husband can see in you that you cannot?

Years ago, I had the opportunity to speak at a friend's church, and Tom came along to offer moral support. I taught my heart out. I was pleased with my speaking—until Tom offered feedback. My helpful husband suggested that I speak with more energy and accelerate my pace. He was trying to offer a helpful critique, but the message I heard was that I wasn't a good speaker. My objections poured out; I discounted all he'd said.

Then I saw my teaching on videotape. I wanted to crawl into a hole until the pain of watching had passed. It was too slow; the energy just wasn't there.

Where had I heard that before?

I wish I would have been vulnerable with my husband by giving thought to his words. He would have been honored that I respected his opinion, and I would have become a better speaker earlier. It is second nature to be defensive and cut yourself off from the advantage that a second perspective brings to your life. What does your husband see in you that you cannot? Ask him. It might surprise you to hear what he has to say.

Defensiveness concerning your husband's input discredits his words. Admitting your shortcomings allows your respect of his opinion to open the door to romance. When you expose your vulnerability by admitting you're hurt, asking for his help, and respecting his perspective, you lower your defenses and invite your husband to romance.

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The aspect of TRACE that I've been focusing on lately is appreciation. I've expressed (through laughter and words) my appreciation for Tom's incredible sense of humor. His zany ways bring laughter and smiles to those whom he comes into contact with—even complete strangers.

It's not that I didn't appreciate it before—I love it when he makes people laugh—but sometimes I'd critique his performance and suggest he "tone it down" a bit, leaving him feeling deflated. Since starting this intentional appreciation of my husband's sense of humor, I've noticed changes in his behavior toward me. He frequently displays many gentlemanly qualities that I really enjoy such as opening car doors, carrying heavy objects for me, holding my chair before I sit down, and allowing me to precede him when entering an elevator or room. I feel cherished when he does these things—I feel romanced!

Do your words or actions serve as stumbling blocks or invitations to your husband to join you in a romantic relationship?

Chapter Review

Main Point

When you
Trust instead of control
Respect instead of demean
Appreciate instead of criticize
Confer confidence instead of doubt
Expose vulnerability instead of defensiveness
you TRACE a path to more romance.

Discussion

1. For each of the methods listed below, think of a time when you tried to control your husband. How did he respond to your attempts? What were you afraid would happen if you let him do it his way?
 - a. Correcting.
 - b. Instructing.
 - c. Improving.
2. In what ways do you regularly try to control your husband?
3. In what areas do you withhold respect? What requirements must he fulfill before you give him respect? What is at the heart of your disrespect: feeling unloved, pride, low self-esteem, fear, or something else?
4. How does your husband respond when you disrespect him?
5. Describe a time when you showed respect to your husband. How did he respond?
6. In what ways do you convey dissatisfaction for your husband?
7. What is one way you could show appreciation for him this week?
8. Have you been focusing on your husband's strengths or his faults?
9. Have you thanked your husband for the ways he shows you love?
10. In which areas do you doubt your husband's abilities? Are these areas in which God has gifted you?
11. In what areas could your husband use more confidence—what self-doubt has he voiced?
12. What triggers cause you to be defensive rather than vulnerable? If you don't know, ask God.
13. Which areas of your life do you keep hidden because you fear rejection? With whom can you share them?

Action Steps

Review TRACE and prayerfully determine which areas need improvement. Pick one area to grow in, tell a friend, and ask her to check up on you regularly to find out how you're doing and encourage you to keep at it.

Prayer

Lord, help me mark out a new path for my feet—one that invites my husband to romance. I relinquish my control issues to you, knowing that you watch over me and care about what happens to me. Committing myself to obey your Word, I will respect my husband. Remind me to focus on my husband's positive attributes, as I would like him to do for me. I will seek your wisdom and build my house by conveying confidence to my husband that he can do everything with the help of Christ who strengthens him. Finally, help me fulfill my part of the contract to take refuge in you, assured by your words that you will be my protector. Amen.

Talk to Your Husband

Share the five TRACE steps with your husband, and ask him to name one or two of your bad habits which inhibit the romance he feels toward you. If you start feeling defensive, refrain from speaking angrily, defending yourself, or pointing out his weaknesses to make you feel better. Instead, remind yourself that you need to know where to improve if you're going to become good at TRACING a new path toward romance. Tell yourself that your husband already loves you the way you are, that you want to improve to please God and delight your husband, and that God will help you TRACE a new path.

Suggested Reading

Love & Respect: The Love She Most Desires; The Respect He Desperately Needs—Emerson Eggerichs
Wild at Heart: Discovering the Secret of a Man's Soul—John Eldredge
The Proper Care and Feeding of Husbands—Laura Schlessinger
The Husband Project: 21 Days of Loving Your Man--on Purpose and with a Plan—Kathi Lipp